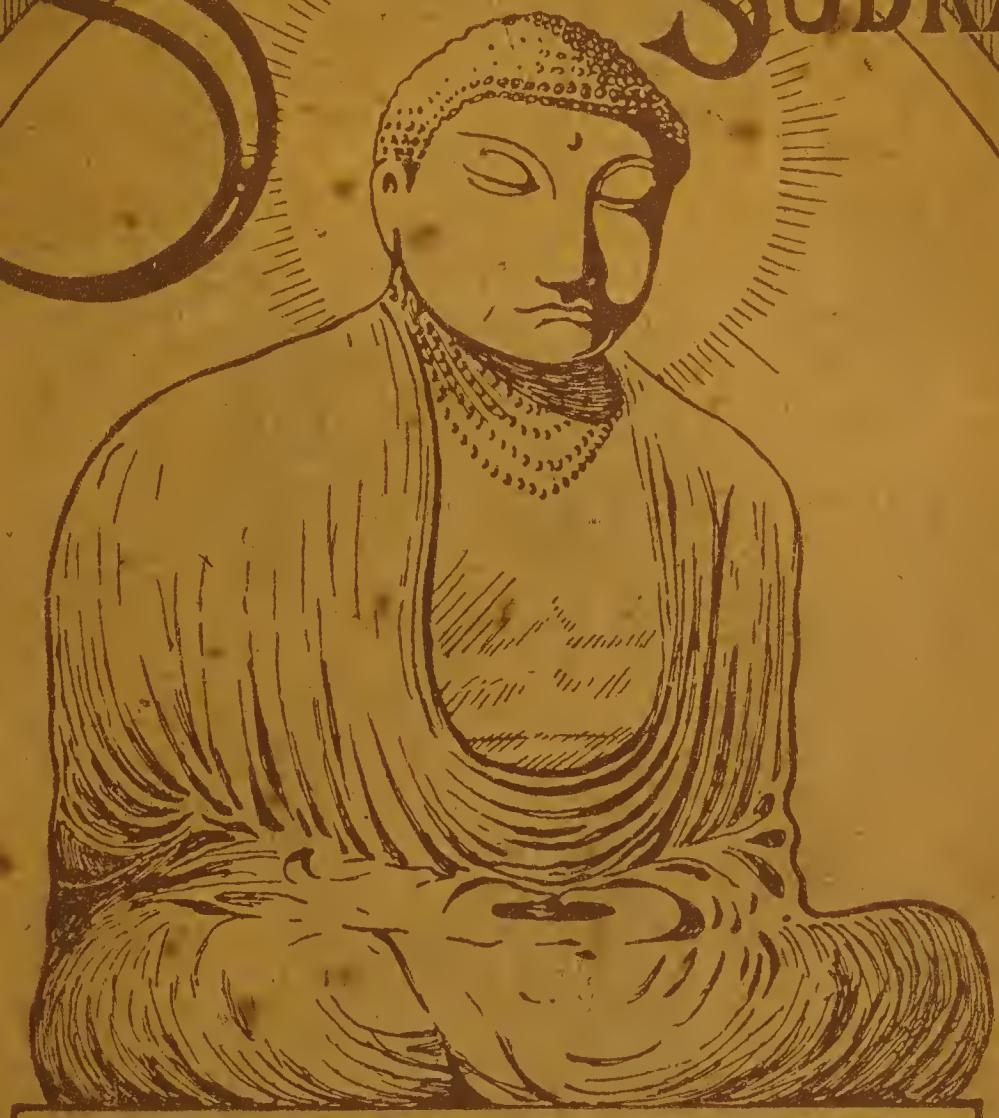




SONGS OF A SUDRA



VIKMALI DASS



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BEING

TRANSLATIONS FROM THE "KARMA"

OF VIKMALI DASS

BY D. C.

L. P. : Rachel

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TO
LEONARD ALDRIDGE
THESE.



INTRODUCTORY

I THE TRANSLATION

In view of the growing demand of late years for a wider acquaintance with the Literature of the Orient, it is to be hoped that the following translations from the "Karma" of Mr. Vikmali Dass, may prove of welcome interest. To Anglo-Indians the poetry of Mr. Dass may not be altogether unknown, inasmuch as he has been an occasional contributor to both English and Native periodicals in Calcutta, but as far as the translator is aware, this is the first time that any serious effort has been made to introduce the work of this promising young Bengali poet to English Readers.

The task of translation has been a happy and personal one, while it has been made with as scrupulous an adherence to the metre and meaning of the original as has been reasonably possible. To have rendered these exotic songs and poems into conventional English verse, would have been comparatively an easy matter, although to have done so would have been to have destroyed their native simplicity and charm. After much hesitation, therefore, and with the frequent collaboration of the Author, I have chosen to "interpret" rather than to "translate" them. This method of interpretation so successfully applied by Fitzgerald to the

" Rubaiyat " of Omar Khayyam, is, I think, infinitely preferable to the old cheerless method of the Academic School, whose word-and-phrase translations have done so much to disenchanted the man-in-the-street of any interest he might have had—or taken—in the classic literature of Greece and Rome. Accordingly I have chosen to follow the Modern School of Mr. S. H. Butcher, Mr. Andrew Lang, Professor Gilbert Murray, and others. Mr. Lang's faultless prose and *spiritual* interpretation of the beauty and sense of Homer, and Mr. Murray's charming and passionate transcript of Euripides, are so excellent, that they might well pass for original compositions. In a like manner I have endeavoured to "interpret" a great deal of the "Karma" of Mr. Dass, meeting thought with thought, and passion with passion. How far I have succeeded I leave others to judge. I would like to add, however, that Mr. Dass himself, both speaks and writes English fluently, but to my urgent request that he should be his own translator, he replied with characteristic naivety : " What I have wrought in ivory, I cannot re-do in wood." Could anything be more decisive—more loftily Homeric ? I have been much indebted, however, to Mr. Dass for his valuable advise and supervision, also, to Mr. Rampurra Singh of Serampur College.

II BIOGRAPHICAL

Born at Ramkrisnapur a suburb of Calcutta in 1891, of parents belonging to the "sudra" or working class, Mr. Dass is still a young man in the prime of life. As a lad, however, he picked up a precarious livelihood about the docks and quays of Calcutta, eventually making several voyages to Further India and Japan. This early association with the sea and with those who go down to it in ships, accounts no doubt for the frequent references he makes to the Deep in his poetry, and to the "Great Sahib Ships" in which he spent many arduous days of his youth.

At the age of sixteen fortune came his way in the person of Mr. Francis Tavener, partner in a firm of jute merchants in Calcutta. A large hearted English gentleman and a scholar, Mr. Tavener now claims the honour (and rightly so) of having "discovered" Mr. Dass. The singular manner of their acquaintance is worthy of record. It would appear that shortly prior to their personally meeting, Mr. Dass after a run in the capacity, I believe, of "lascar" or deck-hand, on a P and O ship to Colombo, obtained some sort of odd-job employment in Mr. Tavener's warehouses in Clive Street. About the same time, also, he was contributing fugitive verses to the "Amrita Bazar Patrika" and Calcutta "Statesman", under the pseudonym of "Rama". It was a poem in

this latter periodical, which attracting the attention of Mr. Tavener, led to that gentleman making enquiries respecting its authorship. Great indeed was his surprise to find the object of his search menially employed upon his own premises. Needless to add, the acquaintance thus romantically formed was mutually happy, Mr. Dass henceforward becoming the protégé of Mr. Tavener. Thus for the period of three years he attended the Central Hindu College at Benares, where he proved himself an apt and diligent scholar, specialising in the study of English and English Literature, and in every way justified the good opinion that Mr. Tavener had formed of him. Leaving the College at the age of twenty Mr. Dass again entered the Offices of Mr. Tavener in Clive Street, but this time under very different circumstances.

It was about this time, also, that he wrote his famous "Durga—Pātha" which attracted considerable attention, while no little hostility was shown towards him in the Native Press for his, so called, "Anglocised Atheism" (whatever that may be). The real root of the trouble however, lay in the fact that he had attacked certain discreditable phases of Hindu worship, to which I shall have occasion to refer later. The personal violence to which Mr. Dass was also subjected during the Festival of Khali, celebrated at Khaligat a little way outside of Calcutta, and near to his home,—led to Mr. Tavener offering him a clerical appointment in the

London Offices of his Company, until such time as public opinion in Calcutta became more temperate towards the young poet.

Accordingly he visited London in the Spring of 1910, finding rooms for himself in Maida Vale and afterwards in Brixton. Referring to his visit to England Mr. Dass assured me that it was one of the happiest times of his life. He became enthusiastic over everything English, and was particularly impressed and gratified at the manner in which his fellow countryman, and master singer of Bengal, Mr. Rabindranath Tagore, was "taken up" by the British reading public. He expressed a hope that it would lead to a better understanding and appreciation of what India has done, and is doing, in the world of Thought and Action. For India is very much awake to-day, and if Mr. Dass may be taken as typically representative of up-to-date Anglo-Indian mentality and culture (and I think in a manner he is) then, it assuredly augurs well for the much talked of Renaissance and Reformation of India. Indeed, Mr. Dass is a real and very much alive Singer of the "Dawn", and a thorough revolutionary in every way, except seditiously, against the country of his adoption. His poetry strikes an entirely original note—a semi-tone if you will—between the poetry of the East and that of the West. While typically oriental in structure and imagery, it is strikingly occidental in power of thought and expression, with occasional song-bursts of real sweetness

After a residence of some two years in England, during which time he visited many places of historic interest, and made the acquaintance of many literary and social celebrities, including the author of "Robert Elsmere", he returned to India via Vienna and Constantinople. In the City of the Sultans, Mr. Dass came near to walking the "straight white road" to which the inimitable R.L.S. refers in his "VAILIMA LETTERS"—better known as marriage. The lady was not English, and it would appear, not particularly young, but regarding this "affaire d'amour" Mr. Dass is discreetly silent. On his return to Calcutta however, Mr. Tavener was not quite so reticent on the matter, as Mr. Dass laughingly explained to me.

The next two years were spent in visiting various parts of India on business with Mr. Tavener, and in writing his "Karma", which appeared in Calcutta shortly before the outbreak of war. With a true sense of patriotism, or possibly, to be more correct—with a deep feeling of moral obligation towards the country which had done so much for his native India, Mr. Dass offered his services to the Government. Much to the disappointment of Mr. Tavener, who had obtained for him a desirable post in the Indian Army, he chose rather to enlist in the corps of native transport drivers then mobilising for duty overseas. Accordingly the bright ability and charming personality of this young Bengali poet was entirely lost during four

years of hardships and adventure under the Army number of 027048.

“Dilli dur ast” (It’s a far cry to Delhi). I am thus reminded of the scowling retort of the old Shaikh Nizam-ud-din-Aulia looking upon the builders of Taghlakabad—whenever I recall the manner of my own acquaintance with Mr. Dass. It was at Bergues in the North of France shortly after the Armistice. I had moved down with my regiment from behind Peronne to a camp on the Hondschoote canal, adjoining which was an Ordnance Depot, and beyond that again the horse lines of a Company of Indian Transport. Here in the course of Army routine I met driver Vikmali Dass. In personal appearance there was little to distinguish him from among his fellow drivers—such is, if I may be permitted to say so—the “levelling” or democratic effect of khaki. Duty throwing us much together, it was not long before I became aware of my young friend’s literary proclivities, and also became the proud possessor of an autograph copy of “Karma”. Before parting company, I further discussed the project of translating Mr. Dass’s book under the title of “Songs of a Sudra”, and entered into an agreement with him for so doing.

III INDIAN RENAISSANCE

To rightly appreciate the poetry of Mr. Dass with its quaint cynicism and occidental culture, it

is necessary to understand in some degree what is taking place in native educational circles in India. A few explanatory words will suffice.

The late social, industrial, and racial upheaval, which we are pleased to call "The Great War", has made a deep, and without doubt, very lasting impression upon the peoples of the far East, but particularly so of India. Possibly never before in the history of the World have races and nationalities been so thrown together—shaken up like peas in a bag—as during the past four years of war. Musalmans and Hindus have fought gallantly, side by side with Englishmen on the old battlefields of Flanders; soldiers from the Great Commonwealth of Australia and New Zealand, have stormed heights almost within sight of ancient Ilium; Americans, Portuguese, and even Fijians, have seen rough service on many fronts; while the Home Units of our Island Empire have moved to victory in every theatre of war. What the ultimate issue of this great intermingling of peoples and problems will be—with its potentialities for good and much evil—remains to be seen. One thing, however, is evident, and that is the real awakening of the East from its slumbers of centuries. The armed legions of the West have thundered by once again, but this time the awakened East is not returning to its sleep. Great changes are impending throughout its length and breadth—changes spiritual, social, and political. In India alone, the old passive

indifference to events happening within and without of itself, is rapidly passing away. A new spirit has been born—a progressive impulse and interest awakened in matters of Religion and Education, together with a quickening in general of life throughout its countless millions.

To three primary causes—roughly at least—may these momentous changes be attributed. Firstly, to the introduction of the study of Western science and Literature; secondly, to the triumph of Buddhist Japan over Christian Russia, in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/5; and thirdly, but not least, to the cyclonic events which for the past four years have convulsed Europe. To these may be added the work done by indigenous Christian Churches, which gradually perhaps, but none the less visibly, are bringing about a revolution in the established Native religions. Important schisms have already-taken place in these old Faiths, Mohammadan as well as Hindu, and new societies formed, notably the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj. These schisms for the most part have been the outcome of Western secular and religious education. The Christian Churches and the British Government have now for years past been creating a new "Indian" quite as much as a new India. The Sikh, Pathan, Bengali, etc., who in the past conflict loyally made many sacrifices for King and Emperor, is essentially a different individual to the Sepoy who fought in the service of the old East India Company. He

might be called almost a man with an "ideal", if not quite yet with a nationality, or shall I say, with a sense of racial relationship? His enthusiasm, perhaps, is more of an *esprit de corps* for his native India, than any real display of patriotism. The general hatred of the foreigner may also be taken into consideration. But the germ of "nationality" is there notwithstanding. Given time, education, and opportunity, it is quite reasonable to suppose that out of the racial elements of modern India there will arise some day an Indian Nation, just as surely as out of the welding together of our Norman and Teutonic ancestors there has grown up our own great English People.

IV CRITICISM

In considering the poetry of Mr. Dass the critic is confronted by a unique difficulty—a basis for comparison. The beauty and utility of poetry like that of every human endeavour, can only be gauged by subjecting it to a standard of comparison. Now, in the present instance, so far as the translator is aware, there exists in modern India no such standard, for the very good reason that there is no native literature—always excepting the ancient treasure-house of the Vedas. Broadly speaking, modern India as regards its literary status, is still in the age of the trouv res and troubadours. That is to say, whatever craving the native may feel for

the aesthetic delights of Poetry and Romance, this is more than satisfied by the itinerant village singer, who to the accompaniment of a vina, chaunts reams of verse—adaptations for the most part from the mythological and cosmogonic hymns of the Vedas. On the other hand, the existent native Press (such as it is) appeals to a very limited circle of “educated” natives. Further, its purpose is mainly social and political, and makes no pretence, as Carlyle would say, to brandish or bear about the Torch of Science and Enlightenment. That a few “rushlights and sulphur-matches” have appeared from time to time, is surely not a matter for wonder, but rather an indication of the eternal desire of genius to express itself, no matter what are the difficulties of its environment.

Thus despite of the destroying influence of caste, want of education, and early poverty, Mr. Dass has sprung up, as one might say, out of the very soil of India. He is a Sudra and not a Brahmin; a singer of the Dawn, a revolutionary and a mystic. While not strikingly original and with no great breadth of vision or loftiness of imagination, he possesses, notwithstanding, a true poetic talent, as virile as it is rare.

At first impulse, one might be tempted to compare his “Karma” with the writings of Mr. Rabindranath Tagore, but to do so would be just to neither poet. Would it be sound criticism to estimate the poetry of the late Rupert Brooke, with

its one inimitable sonnet, by the standard of Milton or Wordsworth? I think not? Other criteria are required; which, in the case of our young Bengali Idealist, as I have endeavoured to point out, do not exist. How then shall the following translations be judged with regard to their utility as poetry? By the standard of their intrinsic excellence: that seems to be the only rational basis; and the only basis by which, after all, true Art must either stand or fall. A few words of criticism, therefore, with regard to their pretensions to notice, will not be amiss.

Firstly then, Mr. Dass, is essentially a lyric poet. His didactic and more serious poems, excellent though they be in many ways, are not especially remarkable for either subtlety of thought or expression. Many of them, however, are characterised by a quaint humour, which not infrequently reminds the Reader of the facetious seriousness of Heine. "The Goddess" and "Super-man" might be instanced in this respect. In the latter poem, after apostrophising the

. . . "Omnipotent,
all-seeing, all-powerful, omniscient,
Inner-most One"—

he concludes that this super-individual is

. . . "No less than he,
The Sahib,
Curse him!"

One is interested to know if Mr. Dass had a *raison d'être* for writing that?

But it is in his simpler poems that Mr. Dass is happiest. In these, he betrays no mean power for lyrical expression, although over-prone like all oriental writers, to become even in his lyrics, didactic and sententious. Seldom, however, does he loose himself in mere word-winding or nebulous nothings, despite the strong under-current of mysticism that distinguishes much of his poetry. He is at all times a thoughtful singer, with a true poets' sympathy for the wronged and wretched. His poem of the "dancer darkly beautiful" is, in this respect, charming. There is, also, much passion in what he writes, coupled with a gift for conciseness in telling a tale, which is admirable. Many of his poems are simply little tales. "The Burial of Rishi Lal" is possibly the best. In this poem, priests of various religions persuasions are depicted quarrelling over the corpse of a holy man. They conclude their wrangle by tearing off the gravecloth thus revealing—"only flowers!" The idea is pretty; the moral excellent.

Regarded upon the whole, however, the poetry of Mr. Dass is immature, and like that of most young poets, it bears unmistakable signs of the workshop. Thus, in his devotional poems, several of which are included in the present volume, he betrays his indebtedness to his great contemporary Mr. Tagore. Indeed, Mr. Dass is one of his

warmest admirers, and speaks of him as the Swinburne of India. On the other hand, Mr. Dass has expended much good poetry on a very unsavoury theme. It is for this reason that his "Durgā-patha", in many ways his best work, is not included here in its entirety, only parts of it being regretfully possible to translate. The poem as its name would suggest, deals with the festival of Durga and Hindu phallic worship. After reading it, one is glad to return to the light and freshness of his lighter poems. Mr. Dass is nothing if not a lyric poet. "The Road to Delhi" "The Go-Vinda" "Love amid the Canes" and many others are true song-births. It is to be hoped, therefore, that Mr. Dass will do more in this style and leave doubtful themes and religious speculations (brahmodya) severely alone.

It but remains to add, in justice to Mr. Dass, that the following attempted translations convey but a meagre impression of the beauty and freshness of the originals. If, however, I have succeeded in introducing the poetry of Mr. Dass to English readers, without having deprived it altogether of its native simplicity and charm, then shall I feel fully compensated for what has been, to a large degree, otherwise a labour of love.

D. C.

Acton, W. 3.

16-4-20.

PROEM

*When Purusha the God-man,
Was by the Gods divided—
Of his mouth was the Brahmin ;
Of his arms the Rājanya ;
Of his thighs the Vaishya ;
But of his feet
Was
The Sudra.*

SAHIB SHIPS

*Where the great Sahib ships come sailing
Up the seas from Singapore,
Sits an ancient brazen Buddha
By the Hooghly sunderbunds.
Tortuous his limbs, and twisted
Are his toes beneath his thighs,
And his palms upturned, gigantic,
Rest upon his knees.*

*And the Buddha brooding, dreaming,
Looks towards the Isles of Palm,
Looks towards the sandy atols
Of the yellow sunderbunds,
Where the great Sahib ships come sailing
Up the seas from Singapore.*

*None know what his sightless vision
Sees, or dreams of all the day.
None know, only he, the Dreamer,
And his thin lips smile and smile—
As he sees the Sahib ships sailing
Up the seas from Singapore.*

*Thinks he : “ I have known the wisdom
Of Asoka, seen the might
Of the lordly Chandragupta
Passing down to Panipat—
Heard the measured tread of legions*

*Halt, and lave their naked feet
In the Indus, hot with trampling
Down the Empires of the East—
Seen the haughty Lords of Ghasni
Ride their howdahed elephants
Into Delhi 'mid the splendour
Of their Afghan chivalry."*

*And the Buddha brooding, dreaming,
Looks towards the sunbound Isles,
Where the great Sahib ships come sailing
Up the seas from Singapore.*

THE BURIAL OF RISHI LAL

*In far Charkhand,
Heard I this from one who said—
“I tell you what is true :
God hates a lie.”*

*Know then
The time had come for Rishi Lal to die,
And so he died,
And lay
In the house of Mohammed Shah.*

*For one so holy,
There was great weeping,
For old, and wise, and good,
was
Rishi Lal.*

*Said Mohammed Shah—
“ We shall take him unto Mecca,
By Ali and Omar,
And buried shall he be
Beside the Prophet—
God is great ! ”*

The Brahmins said—

*“ Nay, but unto Benares take this saint,
And there
Shall all behold the burning
Of
Rishi Lal.”*

Then spake,

*Out of the Book of Odes,
A pilgrim from the Land of Dragons—
“ Take him ” said he,
“ Unto the City of Ming,
And there
Make a great Feast of Lanterns.”*

And so for long

*They argued o'er the bier of Rishi Lal,
And quarrell'd
In the house of Mohammed Shah.*

Said one

Grasping the shroud—

“ By Allah ! it shall be as Allah wills ”—

Said one

Grasping the shroud—

“ By Khristna ! shall ye dare to do this thing ? ”—

Said one

Grasping the shroud—

“ Now by the Llama's head this shall not be.”—

*And so
Grasping the shroud together it was rent,
And there beneath
Lay
ONLY FLOWERS !*

*In far Charkhand,
Heard I this from one who said—
“ I tell you what is true :
God hates a lie.”*

ORDINATION

—Came again
I to the old Sadhu, and said—
„Master, the task is done,
Give me the blessing that I may go forth.”

High lifted he
An old thin hand and placed
One finger on my forehead—“Tell me, then,
“What seeth thou?” he asked.

“Oh, Master, I behold thee old and wise,
Keeper of the Gate of Wisdom; one
With Brahma born again;
Of Ishvara, Lord of Being,
Priest”

“Go”, he said,
Pointing the way—
“Not yet thine eyes are open’d”.

Once again
Came I before the Master—Spake no word;
Knelt; and he knew my mission; took my hands,
Placed them upon his knees—thin, twisted knots
Of fleshless bone

“And now,
“What seeth thou?”, he asked.

* * * * *

*Laugh'd low
The old Sadhu within his beard. "Chela,
"Thine is the gift" he said;
"Om! but thy fingers hold the thread—
Weave! Weave!"*

*When forth I pass'd
From out his presence aureoled, I kiss'd
His withered lips as might a lover kiss,
And laugh'd with him.*

THE ROAD TO DELHI.

*When I go down to Delhi
By the red cantonment road,
It is then I hear the tramplings
And the drums of long ago ;
Hear the cymbals of the Sultans,
And a thousand feet that tread
Through the shadows down to Delhi,
In the dusk.*

*When I go down to Delhi
By the red cantonment road,
There are ghosts that walk beside me
From the Tower of the Faith ; *
By the tombs and riven columns
Of the halls of Indrapat—
When I go down to Delhi
In the dusk.*

*When I go down to Delhi,
And I hear the bugles blow
In the drowsy hush of even,
From the Lines along the Ridge—
Oh, I know the Sahib is watching,
But he never sees the gleam
Of Ferozabad the Golden
In the dusk.*

* *Kutab Minar.*

*Oh, when I go down to Delhi
By the red cantonment road,
It is then I hear the tramplings
And the drums of long ago.
And I dream a dream of splendour,
When the dead shall wake the dead,
And a Sultan ride to Delhi
With the dawn.*

THE DESERT OF LOP

*Oh, I have come far
To thee, Beloved,
Far as the Desert of Lop.*

*Oh, I have gifts
For thee, Beloved,
Gifts from the Desert of Lop.*

*Oh, my camel bells ring
For thee, Beloved,
Ring from the Desert of Lop.*

*Oh, I have come far,
With my camel bells,
With gifts for thee,
For thee, Beloved,
Far from the Desert of Lop.*

HYMN TO HIRANYAGARBHA *

*To Him the praise, to Him the Sacrifice.
Light-giver, Lord of Being, who before
Aught was, became. The Symbol of the Wheel,
The Treasure of the Casket,—“I” and “Thou”
Have place with Him, and are not phantasies.*

*To Him the praise, to Him the Sacrifice,
Hiranyagarbha, even the Golden One.
Who that He might be known did image forth
After His image, all that is—Dyaus,
Varuna, and the Gods ; and “I” and “Thou”
Have place with Him, and are not phantasies.*

*To Him the praise, to Him the Sacrifice,
The Breath, the Law, the Multiple, the One,
The Absolute without Beginning ; Arc
Of the Descent ; of Evil and of Good,
One source and mystery ; and “I” and “Thou”
Have place with Him, and are not phantasies.*

* * * * *

*To Him the praise, to Him the Sacrifice,
To Him the days and the returning years ;
Beauty, and Spring, and Love, and Age, are His ;
And when He wills it, Sleep ; and “I” and “Thou”
Have place with Him, and are not phantasies.*

* *HIRANYAGARBHA*—the primal cosmic golden egg, from which, according to Hindu mythology, was produced the Spirit that desired and created the Universe.—Trans.

MY UNCLE

*Slowly the ekka
Of my uncle Daya
At Delhi, in the Street of Jewellers,
Rolls along the road of palms,
That leads
To the white house of Sahib.*

*Daya,
Oh, my uncle, in the Street of Jewellers,
Why is it
That to the white house of Sahib,
You take your trinkets,
While I—
Dasaputra—
In the green fields of rice,
Toil and toil ?*

I have thought this.

THE BEST

*Oh, I could sing of many things,
But to sing of thee, Beloved,
Is
The Song of Songs.*

A SONG

*As when at morn the amber East
Steals from the night its stars away,
So do thine eyes. Beloved, take
Out of my heart its wild desires.*

*Swift as the startled faun that leaps
Far from the huntsman, flees my heart—
Oh, for thine eyes are like his bow,
Thy glances like his shafts that slay.*

THE CHASTENING

*Hasan of Basra unto the mullah came
And made confession of his Creed. He said,
“ O Father, there is not sincere in Faith
“ One, who does not with patience long endure
“ The chastening of Allah ”.*

*The mullah thought,
Stroked his long beard, and said in answer, “ Son,
“ Oh, there is never one sincere in Faith,
“ Who finds not in the chastening of Allah,
“ Happiness ”.*

*Spoke again
Hasan of Basra humbly : “ Old of Days,
“ There is not ever one sincere in Faith,
“ Who in the Wisdom and the Thought of Allah,
“ Forgets not the chastening ”.*

ONCE ENOUGH

*The Dead are very real, Thakur Dada,
And
It is very real to be dead—
Do you doubt this ?*

*Has not the white Sahib said,
That we live again—
Do not the Brahmins say,
That we live many times ?*

*But
To me it seems,
That to have lived once,
Is enough.*

THE TAJ

*Claspt in the saffron arms
Of night, the Taj
Lies
Like an unravished bride
Of old Babar.*

*Fair as a moon-faced slave
From the far tents of Turkistan.*

*Fair as fire-flies in the dark hair
Of one beloved.*

*Fair as the bangled limbs
Of dancers.*

*Fair as shawls of silk—
As pots of musk—
As strings of pearls—
As a Sultana upon a red cushion—
As a rose
From the Gardens of Irem.*

THE ATAVIST

*At the College of Benares,
I have read
Xenophon and Burke—
Then,
Such is the way, Thakur Dada—
I have gone,
Like my father before me
And made
Oblation to an idol made of jade,
With ivory eyes,
Hideous paunch,
And in its navel
A ruby.*

THE DANCER

*With jasmine in her scented hair,
With head low-bowed into her palms,
Sat in the lantered dim bazaar,
A dancer darkly beautiful.*

*The shrilling reeds she heeded not,
Nor heard the loudly throbbing drums,
Saw not the spangled dancers leap
In ghostly, dreamful sarabands.*

*Old Ali bent his turbaned head
Low to the nerveless lips of her—
“ Allah ! Sahib ! ” was all she said—
Then Ali gave her wine to drink.*

*That night upon the flaming ghats,
High leapt the crackling pyre, and there
Out of the lantered dim bazaar,
Brought they the dancer beautiful.*

MAYA

*I have tried
To understand many things—
Even the Brahmins
Do not understand them all.*

*Why is the Sahib so wise ?
Why does he think himself so wise ?
Why does the grey squirrel,
In the tall tamala,
Have five stripes ?
And why,
Hath the peacock,
So harsh a song ?*

*Then,
Have I not seen a rishi,
Speak with the dancing girls,
When the wood fires burned
Red at dusk,
And no one saw ?*

*Many things
Have I tried to understand ;
But all is maya.*

REST

I saw

*Written by the finger of a wise man,
Once in the sands
Of far Narajapur
This—*

*"The lotus sleeps upon the pool
Of the Sultan's garden,
But my heart,
My heart sleeps in the palm of Buddha."*

THE MEETING

*In the gay Bazaar,
A chatti in her hand,
Jasmine in her hair,
Met I her.*

*In the fields of rice,
Bending in the sun,
Laughing, singing there,
Met I her.*

*On the cold stone Ghats,
Colder than the stone,
She who once was fair,
Met I her.*

THE QUESTION

At Ajmere,
Like a dark vulture
Perched on the Towers of Silence
Sits,
An old Sadhu,
Who looks with sightless eyes upon the sand
And palmless wastes of Sind—
His limbs
As the roots of the mango
Twisted, and white
With the wood ash of fires that have died out.—
In his day,
Many things had he seen—
At Khandi
He had seen the tooth of Buddha.

“ Oh, Sadhu,
Know you I have read
All the Purānas, all the books
Of all the Creeds,
And sat,
At the feet of the white Christ—
Yet tell me,
For I know not,
Where God is ? ”

*Slowly
Turned he
Upon me his old eyes,
Sunk in red sightless rims—*

*“ Fool !
Canst thou tell me,
Where God is not ? ”*

THE BEGGAR

*Alms for the Beggar of God !
Who will pass him by ?
Bismillah !
Alms !
From Patna down to Malabar,
I have walked in much dust,
Seeing many things that were beautiful,
Seeing many things that were old,—
Parrots like the peach blossom,
Temples and shrines—
Oh, my eyes have looked upon much,
Yet
Never have they seen a man !
Bismillah !
Alms !*

LOVE IN THE CANES

*In a jungle full of canes,
Lo, she passes,
Moon of mine.*

*Why is it I hear no bird
When she passes through the canes ?
Why is it that no bird sings
In the jungle,
Moon of mine ?*

*Is it that I only hear,
Only hear her bangled feet ?
Little silvered bangled feet,
When she passes through the canes ?—
Moon of mine.*

SATI*

Oh, have I not been patient ; heard your reasons ;
Spoken the vow ; and listened, Gifted Ones ?
Ye who have made the Law. Do I deny
Aught you have said or spoken, Gifted Ones ?

Being a woman it is hard for me
Not being gifted, so to understand
All that is in the Law ; owning it good,
Or of the ritual, which you say is right.

Bear with me then, only a little while ;
Fear not that I will fail you in this thing,
He was my Lord. Say, Shall I fail him now,
Who failed him never once in all his days.

Yet it is written, that a woman's mind
Is hard of learning ; and the lot indeed,
Of her intelligence, how small it is—
Indra himself said this, O Gifted Ones !

Wherefore if I should fail in wisdom, now,
To understand the Law, 't is but the way
And weakness of a woman, thus to doubt—
And am I old ? Unfair to look upon ?

* In the original Vidhava, or, the widow; but I consider the above title more applicable.—Trans.

*Not that I fear your fire. Oh, there are wrongs
That sere the heart and kill life utterly,
Worse than your pyre of sticks, and stuped rites
Made to more stupid Gods, O Gitfed Ones !*

*Now you are auger'd. Oh, how poor a thing
Is all this knowledge of the Law you have !
Did I not bear with you ? Hear you out,
Through the long tedium of your ritual ?—*

*And now, in this, my widowhood, you come
Lacking in words of comfort, Yellow-gown'd
Hyenas, that you are, prating of Laws,
Prating of rites, of Yama, and of Death !*

*Oh ! I am but a woman ; less, perhaps,
Than the dull goat that bleats beneath your hand ;
A thing to sacrifice to keep your Law,
To justify your wisdom, Gifted Ones !*

*Take hence, the cup, what need have I for wine ?—
But there is this that I would ask of you,
A woman's wish ; that you will let my babe,
O Gifted Ones ! go with me to the fire ?*

*He was my Lord ; and oh, perhaps, it was
For that, I loved him, in a woman's way,
Jealous my gain should be another's loss ;
Who knows ?—the reason for you, is enough !*

*But this—this little life—this helpless dust
That drags upon my robe ; does it not look,
As I had looked to him, who was my Lord,
For life, perhaps, for love ?—O Gifted Ones !*

*So when the flower is dead, would you destroy
The tree that bore the flower ? Buddha said—
“ Wise are the Wise in all things ”. Oh ! I know
I am not wise enough to plead with you !*

*There, set the stone ; draw now the circle wide—
What idle things there symbols are—I said
I would not fail you. Gently ; there is time—
Oh ! this should make you think—think—Gifted Ones !*

*DEVAYĀNA**

*There are many roads.
Always have there been many roads ;
But even the wisest,
Know not the Road of the Beginning.*

*To what end
Lead these many roads ?
I will tell you
The futility of these many roads.*

*There is the Road of the Brāhmaṇas—
“Thus they (the Gods) fashioned the world.”
There is the Road of the Upanishads—
“Thus they (the Gods) fashioned the world.”
There is the Road Sāṅkhya—
“Thus they (the Gods) fashioned the world.”
There is the Road Vedānta—
“Thus they (the Gods) fashioned the world.”
There is the Road Chārvāka—
“Thus they (the Gods) fashioned the world”*

* * * * *

*Oh, Gurn, my Teacher,
There are many Roads ;
But of the Road that was the Road of the Beginning,
Who knows ?*

* Path of the Gods.

THE WONDER

Oh, is it not beautiful all this,
Ayah, tell me now, is it not beautiful,
The sweet innocence of a child ?
It hath ten little fingers, ten little toes,
Two eyes, and
A mouth,
Sweet as fragrant rose pétal,
Wind-wafted from some garden of Deccan.

Oh, is it not wonderful all this,
Ayah, tell me now, is it not wonderful ?
Although its age be not an inch of Time,
Upon the foot-rule of Eternity—
Aye, not even that,
Yet shall it expand one day
To the comprehension of Buddha and the Law.

BABOO NĀRA

*Baboo Nāra ! Baboo Nāra !
All day up the dusty road,
Up the road to Khandahar.—*

*Came she singing to her soldier,
Came she laughing to her lover,
Baboo Nāra, Baboo Nāra,
Sepoy of the Poona Corps,
Up the road to Khandahar.*

*Down the road from Khandahar,
Came the tread of marching feet,
Tread and dust of marching feet,
Came the column, came the victors,
Came the native Poona Corps,
Down the road from Khandahar.*

*Baboo Nāra ! Baboo Nāra !
There are two dark eyes that weep,
Two slow feet that widely wander
All day down the dusty road—
With no singing for her soldier,
With no laughter for her lover,
Who comes marching never more,
Down the road from Khandahar.*

THE CONVERT

Wherefore by the sound of littlle bells,
Wherefore by the music of little bells,
Lured by the magic of little bells,
Come I into thy shrine,

O Varuna !

It is, that I have walked
Too long in the ways of my own choosing.
Oh, it is a great weariness,
To walk in the way of thine own choosing.
Enough,
That I should take but thy three strides,

O Vishnu !

It is, that I have loved,
To behold the way,
To judge the way of my own choosing.
Henceforth, be thou mine eyes ;
Thou who seeth through the garments of Night—
Enough,
That I stay or go forward at thy will,

O Sūryā !

*It is, that I have dared
With Vritra to contend, Lord of Darkness.
What am I that I should strive with him ?—
Enough,
That Gods alone destroy ; that thou shouldst rise
Drink of the Soma ; hurl thy bolt of fire,*

O Indra !

*Wherfore it is for this,
That by the sound of little bells,
That by the music of little bells,
That by the magic of little bells,
I come unto thy shrine,*

O Varuna !

THE LAND OF MEMORY

*O sanpan ! with the yellow sail,
Bring honey from the Hills of Dream,
Bring apples from the Isles of Sleep,
That I may sup their sweets and sail
To mistlands of Old Memory.*

*A dragon dwells beside the stream
That flows beneath the walls of Nen,
And guards the haunted honeycomb
Of hives upon the Hills of Dream,
And apples of the Isles of Sleep,
That grow beneath the walls of Nen.*

*O sanpan ! with the yellow sail,
Bear me away, bear me away,
To the lost Land of Memory.*

REINCARNATION

*Would that I could be born again.
Would that I could be born ten times,
Ten times ten,
Aye, for ever and for ever
Born again.*

*And what would I do,
God with the eyes of Gold ?—
Know you what I would do,
Kama with the lotus lips ?—*

This would I do—

I should be born again.

WHY

*Beautiful although thou art,
Why dost thou for ever think,
In the lustre of your eyes,
In the glory of your hair,
I must always find desire?*

*Beautiful although thou art,
Say, does golden Ushas* kiss
Of the roses only one—
Only one of all the roses?
Why then, O Beloved, think
In the lustre of your eyes,
On the lotus of your lips,
I must always find desire.*

* *The Dawn.*

DURGA-PĀTHA

Drink ! O wild Companions ! drink with me,
Drink deep. Lift high
The sacrificial cup, the Soma draft,
Drink deep, O wild Companions, hours are brief
That bring the dawn. Behold
The drowsing flames grow dim, night tires
Of revel—drink !
Awake the muted reeds, Companions, wake
Out-panted passion, prone
In surfeit of delicious sense. Arise !
Fulfill the cyclic hours. Kāma, wake !
O wild Companions, let not day surprise
With Beauty your embrace—
Drink now ! Drink ! Drink !

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—Enough,
Twine yet again those arms ambrosial, lift
No questioning lips. Life laughs
Along the panting hollow of thy throat.
Youth calls—Awake
The corporal mystery—fling wide
The Doors of Being. Keeper of the Gate,
Speak that we enter quickly. Negligent
The lotus waits the sun—One kiss,
One kiss upon the burnished bronze

Of thy encloistered breasts—No Sultan e'er
Reigned o'er a world so wide—Enspher'd
Eternity ! Fair haunted tenement
Of Kāma, hid
That we, the wild-eyed votaries, behold
Not recklessly, but drink
By thirsts unquench'd. Sweet seigniory
Of Life enfeued to Time,
I come, I enter with the dust
Upon my holding. Here
Past congregations of the Dead have been,
And over-been. Still yet,
As Rustum to the ring'd palestra sand,
Stept fearless, fearless step
My feet the portals, hunger'd, as a guest
To Cyprian banquets bidden. O begin !—
Unveil ! Unveil !
The ivory cups, thine arms
Enfold with joyance sweet—full-orbed
As moons that sail the yellow fronds of canes,
Drunken with milk
Of Paradise. Unveil
The House Incarnadine, the templed shrine
Of Kāma, oderiferous of Isles
Of cinnamon and santal, portal'd where
Petitioning eyes seek wonderment. O Gods,
What sweetness wounds my sense !

Say,

Is this Nirvāna ? This
The svarga-loka of Desire ? No more,

*I ask no more than this. Approach—
Unveil the roseal bliss,
The limbs of Being perfect : Youth
Kiss'd to sweet immortality and drench'd
With dews inebriating not
As wine, but wild,
As soft as muted reeds. Oh, lap
My soul in langour. Lift
Self out of self. Turn not
Guru, from this thy face. Here dwells
Templ'd the Mystery of Life, here I
Would enter, toying first
With its soft animate loveliness—touch
The folded doors—kiss once,
Rapt votary, the ring'd
White minarets, and where
They sentinel the court, press down my face
Into the garden of its cloister'd sweets.*

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*O my Lotus !
That sleepeth in the warm pools of my love,—
That scenteth
The Garden of my Heart.*

*O my Cup !
Brimm'd with the wine of Loveliness,—
To drink of thee,
Is to forget all else.*

*O my Serang !
Of a hundred strings.—
What music makest thou
In my heart forever.*

*O my Moon !
In the night of my Life,—
Of its darkness,
Makest thou day.*

*O my Ruby !
From among the jewels of Women,
Not in all Samarkhand,
Is there a gem so fair.*

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

*Leave it to them—
To them, the fearful Ones, whose eyes
Hideous as globes of fire, burn holes
Out of the temple darkness. Oh,
Leave it to them. They haunt
Loathly things, my reason. See
Their simian acts of our acts—How
I hate myself to see my human self
So aped.*

*Am I
So low a thing as this?—no more
Than these, the brutes of Durga, in desire?—*

Passioned, and limbed, and sensed, earth-born
Of earth, as they? Leave it to them,
O Girl,
Leave it to them!

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Three things
Hast thou, Beloved—
I will tell thee
Those three things.

In the dark braids of thy hair,
There is Fate—
In the warm blush of thy limbs,
Desire—
And in thine eyes,
Love.

Oh, three things,
Hast thou, Beloved,
But my heart
Hath only thee.

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Forth to the temple, forth
Inspired of Khali; sons

*Of the tri-breasted Monster. Forth
Mad leaping votaries, browed-low
As swine ; lead on
Thy howling carnival to her
Who waits thee,—feeds thee—Annapura, she
Of the potamic shrine whose fretted quoins
Outline the sunset ; ray'd
With roseal splendour, as the nippled breasts
Of many-limbed Parvati.*

Oh, howl on

*Leap high, and strew your flowers, beat your drums,
Shake your dishevel'd locks, while Night
Shrouds you in vap'rous purple. Oh, behold,
Stark the wild prophets dance, blanch'd
With the white ash of fires out-burnt
To Khali—thin
As tigers reft
Of their soft tawny cubs, fierce-eyed
Fakeers of Durga. Hark !
What madness ? what wild shrieks
Shake the wide lantern'd night ? what acts
Amid the humid press of battling saints
And devotees, out-shame
The carron vulture, or the lep'rous cheek
Of incest, whose foul breath
Is Yama !*

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*O little Gazelle !
That all night,
That all night through,
Leaps in the jungle of Dreams—
You have the eyes of her,
You have the lips of her,
You have the limbs of her—
Far, far,
Into the Silences, down gulfs
Of Sleep, I chase thee,
Little Gazelle,
But never attain thee.*

*Fairie feet
Have you, little Gazelle.
Fleet, fleet,
Over the Moon and the Stars—
You have the eyes of her,
You have the limbs of her,
You have the will of her—
Ever I follow,
Follow, follow,
Into the Silences, down gulfs
Of Sleep, I chase thee,
Little Gazelle,
But never attain thee.*



O Girl
The lotus droops—nearer
Sibilant let sound again
The lutes. See
Frets the slow fountain, still'd
Its music, still'd
To quietude the carnival of sense
Our feet have revell'd—throw
Aside the dacca. Day
Burns up the lambent East. Crush
No more the grape. Pass out,
Out from the House of Flesh—still-born
Its brood of wild desires. Sāvitri speaks
The Four Truths, and I
Am listening

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DOUBT

*Guru, my Teacher, help me in this thing—
For years, unprofitable years, I've tapp'd
The Stick of Reason on the Stones of Doubt,
And grop'd along the rugged, endless path
Of Scepticism, and have found no Light !*

To which the Master said :

*"Chela ; is it the fault of the beam
That the blind man sees it not ? "*

THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

*Oh, why
Do we ever wake from our dreams ?
In the Garden of Dreams,
I am always happy.*

*Do I not walk
A man in the scenes of lost Childhood,
By blue rivers, and yellow fields of cane,
Where there is always Summer ?
And she,
Whom I love as doth the humming bird
The jungle orchids sweet with honey,
Laughs, and gives me her lips to kiss—
And
While I walk the Fields of Illusion,
There is no pain, nor sense
Of any sorrow, any old regrets—*

*Oh, why
Do we ever wake from our dreams ?
In the Garden of Dreams
I am always happy.*

SAMSARA

*Have I not been
As you, in days long past ;
And played
Amid the dust, amid the dust ?
Looked down
From sunny leaves of palm,
And seen
Like drifting flames amid the fronds,
The gorgeous tinted butterflies,
Go by, go by ?*

*Have I
No 'membrance of the Past ?—and yet
The sense of Self, the sense of thee,
The sense of Life, is one with me,
And Nature holds
As in a cup the thirst
And dream of Things—
And I
Not more than thee,
Am but an act
In the Divine Compassionate Event.*

A MEMORY

*On the Hill of Mahadeva,
There's a garden made for love ;
Where the sacred yellow roses—
Haughty Brahmins of the garden,
Where the white enamell'd roses—
Laughing devas of the garden,
Wave a scented flame of passion
Down the drowsy lanes of dusk ;
On the Hill of Mahadeva,
In a garden made for love.*

*Long ago amid the roses,
Bara Mem, amid the roses,
I remember how I saw thee
In thy stately white Sahib gown,
Like a rane of the roses—
While I halted by the cactus
Where the wide Trunk Road sweeps sunwards
To the blue Cashmiri Hills—
Long ago at Mahadeva,
In a garden made for love.*

SUPER-MAN

*He it is !
He the Omnipotent,
All-seeing, All-powerful, Omniscient,
Inner-most One,
THE One—
Who puts enchantment upon me.
Who makes me to do those things for which my heart
Hath no desire.
To accustom myself to that which is strange.
Who cleanseth me.
Who makes me as a maiden anointed.
Beside whom
The Lamp of my Intelligence
Is but a taper in the wind.
Yea, the Shinning One.
No less than he,
The SAHIB—
Curse him !*

YUGA

*When Time comes
That is called Yuga,
And all things end—
In the dark tangles of a woman's hair,
You will find
My heart.*

DESPAIR

*Surely the sun hath gone down
In the full splendour of noon—
Upon the glory of Nature
Hath fallen darkness,
Out of which no star shines—
Broken are the strings of the harp—
Ended the song that is golden,
For she whom I love
Embroiders her robe with flowers,
And at the well
Draws water and laughs with the maidens,
And forgets the Singer of Songs.*

NEVER

*Oh, that I should ever forget the words of my Master ?
He hath spoken unto me
And I must go.
Yea, in the heat of the day I must not loiter,
Nor in the gay Bazaar—
Sweet music shall not stay
The purpose of my feet—
Nor the song of singing birds—
Vainly shall the dancers
Unveil to me their moons of loveliness—
For He hath spoken,
And who shall gainsay
That which He hath said once ?*

WORSHIP

*I will worship Him with folded hands,
Ishvara, Lord of Being,
Indra ! O Indra !*

*With tears I will supplicate before Him,
At His feet I will bow down.*

*There shall be naught that He willeth
But that thing shall my hands labour to do.*

He shall not speak unto me

But that my ears shall receive the blessing of His words.

Yea, I am His servant,

He my Master—

Indra ! O Indra !

THE GIFT

*Take thou this which I give thee,
Oh, Twice-born.*

*I have plucked it in a garden hid away
Out of the dust—
Out of a night of stars—
Nor forget
That to thee I gave it,
O Twice-born.*

*Take thou this which I give thee,
Then to thy dreams
For
'Tis my heart that I give thee.*

THE GODDESS

*Forth she came
From the priest-guarded gates,
Worshipp'd of Khali. Fair
As some anointed Goddess robed
For Rāma's presence. Hung
About her shoulders orchids, scented flames
Of the hibiscus, buds
Of petall'd loveliness, chains
Of floral beauty trampled to the dust—*

*Behold
Back from her presence shrink the human earth
Whose shadow would defile—content
If she but turn a cold, indifferent eye
Upon them, or bless
The worthy with the incense of her breath.*

*Out of the shadow of the dark Bazaar
Triumphant, came she forth,
Mid loud acclaim, into the long
Sun-splashed cantonment road of palms,
Where—
O Blessed Indra !
A mad red-whiskered Sahib
Drove his dark engined-ekka roaring fumes
Of fury, to the bundar where he lived.*

*Horror of Khali!—with a snort she died—
The Blessed, the Anointed, orchid-hung
Bride of the God.*

*Frown'd the white Sahib,
Upon the anger'd priests, the gathered crowd,
Gave many rupees, then again
Into his engined-ekka mounting, spake . . .*

*What the Sahib said none know,
None, save I,
Guru, my Teacher,
I, who speak
The tongue of the Sahib.*

MONSOON

*When the monsoon winds are calling
From the far off Nicobars,
Trail the tall palm fronds in phantom
Images across the dawn.*

*Down the white encircling coral
Sands, the opal combing seas,
Thunder up between the islands
Of the heat-bound sunderbunds.*

*And the smoke-drift of the Sahib ships
Curtains out across the Bay—
When the monsoon winds are calling
From the far off Nicobars.*

THE GREAT TEACHER

*Mullah Ullah of Alegarh,
Taught me the Prayer of Prayers,
And out of the Khoran
Expounded he much wisdom—
Aye, there was much wisdom,
And much expounding,
But
Of that which I would know,
I learned not.*

*At Serampur,
In the Schools of the Sahib,
Many things I learned—
I learned much that was wise and wonderful,
But therein, also,
Of that which I would know,
I learned not.*

*From the Granth,
From the Bhagavad-Gitā,
From Upanishads,
My tongue can speak
Many wise mantras,
But
Of that which I would know,
I learned not.*

*Then,—
It always happens thus,
Guru, my Teacher;
From the lips of a woman
I learned
Wisdom.*

THE GO-VINDA*

*Oh, my little Vanara,**
Come from the forest, as you came then ;
Light your waxen lamps ; set them sailing
Down the Sindhu where the sedges sing.*

*In the twilight tinkle silver bells ;
Lights are moving in the palms ; I hear
Laughter, and the voice of maidens calling
Down the Sindhu where the sedges sing.*

*I, the herdsman, by the river sitting
Hear all this. See the dark buffalo drink,
And the white image of the temple shimmer,
Down the Sindhu where the sedges sing.*

*Oh, my lotus, what is it to love ?
To fall asleep ; to dream a little while ;
To gather moonbeams in a night of longing
Down the Sindhu where the sedges sing.*

* Herdsman.

** Wood-nymph.

THE HIGHEST WISDOM OF ALL

*Listen to this,
Guru, my Teacher—*

*Is not the World beautiful ?
Is not everything in the World beautiful,
Even that which IS evil
And ugly ?*

*Only the pure at heart
And the Old
Understand this.*

APHORISMS

I

*Love will take you to the Door ;
But it is for you to enter.*

II

*In the Garden of Kāma,
There are many nightingales ;
But for all their singing,
There is but one song.*

III

*In the heart of the lotus
Finds the bee the honey which is there—
So, in the lives of men
Time brings forth the hidden sweetness.*

IV

*To part with those we love,
Is, but to die a little.*

V

*In the jungle there are canes as well as banyans.
It is not given to all men to be great.*



SONGS OF A SUDRA



VIKMALI DASS

